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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

DISSENSION AMONG SOUTH VIETNAM'S GENERALS

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

MORI

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
2 August 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

Dissension Among South Vietnam's Generals

Summary

Underlying rifts in the unity of South Vietnam's military leadership have begun to surface again now that a serious threat from the Buddhists and their supporters has been overcome. Current dissension stems primarily from the apparent desire of Premier Ky to replace Deputy Premier and War Minister Co and Co's counter-maneuvers to prevent his dismissal.

Although Ky does not appear concerned about a serious threat to his position at this time, he is still weighing the advantages and disadvantages of taking action against Co, allegedly involved in profiteering. In the background are pressures on Ky from reform-minded middle-grade officers, long-standing problems with at least two independent corps commanders, and alleged suspicions on the part of some Directorate members that Ky may be moving to assume greater personal power.

The repercussions should Co be ousted cannot be accurately foreseen, but he appears to have no significant popular or troop support. Whether or not Co is retained, however, the growing assertiveness of the younger field-grade officers, known as the "Baby Turks", on such issues as Co's status may become a serious problem for Ky.

*Prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence

Current Dissension

1. After several months of relative unity in the military, reports of friction among South Vietnam's military leaders are once more increasing. So far, this friction seems to center on efforts by Premier Ky or his supporters to remove Deputy Premier Nguyen Huu Co, as well as IV Corps commander Dang Van Quang, and the maneuvers of the latter two to circumvent this. Rumors of plotting by Co and Quang seem to stem principally from sources close to the so-called "Baby Turks"--a loose association of energetic field-grade officers--who are applying pressure on Ky to oust the two generals because of their widely reported involvement in financial profiteering.

2. Ky has so far refrained from taking any firm action against Co and Quang, allegedly because he fears such a move would touch off charges of discrimination based on regionalism. Ky is a northerner; Co and Quang are southerners. Ky's hesitation, however, is probably based on other factors as well. He probably does not anticipate repercussions of the proportions which followed General Thi's removal in I Corps last March. However, he may prefer to avoid the disruption caused by the dismissal of a major military figure which is inevitably followed by widespread personnel changes among his subordinates, such as are still occurring in I Corps.

3. Moreover, some sources--probably sympathetic to General Co and Chief of State Thieu--have alleged that Ky is becoming careless in disregarding the authority of the ruling Directorate. Hence a move against Co and Quang might also be interpreted by other generals as a major bid for absolute power by Ky, rather than as a step toward more honest and efficient government.

Background

4. Rumors of the impending dismissals of Generals Co, Quang, and even of II Corps commander Loc, date at least as far back as the ousting of I Corps commander Thi in March 1966. The Buddhist-led political challenge following Thi's dismissal, however, forced a postponement of any such action, and underscored the need for the utmost degree of military

unity. With the crushing of the Buddhist "struggle" movement, pressure against the government relaxed, and the long-standing differences among the military leaders again rose to the surface.

5. More recently, the major changes in Premier Ky's cabinet--the announcement of which was postponed several times reportedly because of objections raised by General Co--resulted among other things in a net loss of administrative authority for General Co. Another factor which contributed to the current friction was the arrest of General Thi and the possibility of his being publicly disgraced by court-martial earlier this month. Although a decision to send Thi abroad has for the present resolved this issue to the satisfaction of all concerned, the idea of Thi and his future being used as political issues by the ruling generals apparently aroused some of the "Baby Turks", who had more respect for Thi in a purely military sense than they did for some of the other junta generals such as Co.

General Co

6. As war minister and, until recently, as the supervisor of other key government ministries, Deputy Premier Co has been in a position to wield considerable influence in the distribution of government funds and in the appointment and promotion of civilian and military officials. Rumors and reports have consistently alleged that Co and his wife have used his position to engage in widespread corruption since last year. Recently, sources who are probably close to Premier Ky have reported in some detail on two of General Co's current illicit activities. Aside from IV Corps Commander Quang, Co appears to have little support among military leaders or lower ranking officers. Moreover, Co has been criticized not only by the "Baby Turks," but by certain Catholic and Buddhist figures as well.

7. General Co has been well aware of the growing precariousness of his position and has recently been maneuvering to create alliances which would act as checks on Premier Ky's ability to remove him. Various sources have reported that Co has been attempting to remove officers of central Vietnamese

origin from responsible command positions in II and III Corps and that Co repeatedly objected to the recent changes in the cabinet. Reports that Co has been in contact with militant Buddhist monk Thich Phap Tri and even with Thi also suggest that Co may be sounding out Ky's opponents in various quarters in an effort to gain support. It appears that Co's main efforts have been defensive, and directed toward maintaining his position by making his dismissal too costly for Premier Ky, rather than toward mounting a coup to remove Ky as premier, as some reports have alleged.

8. Although Co profited generally in the political struggles which followed the Diem government's overthrow, he was never in the forefront and has never indicated a desire for a top political role. He has, however, previously demonstrated extreme jealousy of his prerogatives; he has been a source of contention since the early months of the present regime, partly because of his pique at being forced to trade an appointment as chief of the General Staff for a quasi-political role in the cabinet. Co appears well aware that his usefulness to the Directorate is as a native southerner in a military leadership heavily dominated by northerners, and he has sought, without apparent spectacular success, to build up his southern support.

Premier Ky

9. Premier Ky's major sources of power currently rest upon assumptions within the government that he has firm US support; upon several key supporters who head the government's police and security services and who control troops in the Saigon area; and upon Ky's personal command of the air force.

10. Ky's strength has been increased considerably by a number of recent events, including the repelling of the Buddhist bid for power, and by the removal of General Thi, long considered Ky's primary political rival. During the crisis in the spring of 1966, Ky installed his trusted supporter, Colonel Loan, as national police director in addition to Loan's duties as head of the military security service. Another close associate, General Khang, was recently appointed commander of III Corps, which surrounds

Saigon, while retaining over-all military command of the capital itself. Barring any change of loyalty by General Khang, a successful military coup against Premier Ky appears rather remote.

11. Expressions of dissatisfaction with Ky by various figures within and outside the government are almost certainly due in part to political jealousy and to suspicions that Ky may attempt to make himself all powerful. The prevalence or depth of such feelings is hard to judge, but they could provide General Co with reasonably fertile grounds to develop opposition to Ky.

Other Military Leaders

12. Various sources have alleged that Chief of State Thieu is involved in maneuvering with Co and Quang to try to undercut Ky's authority, or at least his supposed tendency to bypass the Directorate. Sophisticated and ambitious, Thieu has managed to date to survive political shakeups as well as sharp Buddhist attacks, and has avoided any visible signs of personal dissatisfaction with Ky.

13. Thieu may have been disquieted by the replacement of General Tri--a fellow Catholic and close associate on the Directorate--by Premier Ky's supporter, General Khang, as III Corps commander.

14. The positions of II Corps commander Vinh Loc and IV corps commander Quang are influenced by the fact that both have been rumored for possible replacement ever since General Thi's ouster. Like Thi, both have been accused of tendencies toward "warlordism," if on a lesser scale. Such accusations stem in part from the existing governmental practice which allows corps commanders generally a considerable degree of authority and responsibility. However, the example of General Thi may serve to keep Loc and Quang from overstepping the bounds of military authority; both appear to have been more circumspect in recent months and to have supported government action against Thi. Reports linking Quang with Co, however, make Quang's immediate position more uncertain than that of Loc, for whom Ky is said to retain a high personal regard.

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15. Other generals in a position to influence the political scene in Saigon include Pham Xuan Chieu, the Directorate secretary general; Cao Van Vien, chief of the Joint General Staff; and Le Nguyen Khang, concurrently commander of III Corps and the capital region. Chieu has been mentioned in the past as a possible successor to Ky, but he has no power in the form of troop command, and some of his closest political associates have recently lost positions of influence. In general, he has exercised extreme caution in his official political duties. Vien, a strong advocate of firm action against the dissident "struggle movement" in I Corps, appears generally content to implement strictly military policies. Khang, apolitical in the past although presently close to many of the "Baby Turk" officers in the Saigon area, currently professes firm loyalty to Premier Ky.

Baby Turks

16. This rather vague association of energetic field-grade officers within various specialized military commands appears in some respects to be following in the footsteps of the current ruling generals, who themselves were described only a short time ago as the "Young Turks." The "Baby Turks" have had an increasingly significant influence on major developments. During April and May, they expressed a strong desire to take forceful action against the "struggle" movement in central Vietnam, and provided Premier Ky with essential backing in quelling the antigovernment movement. At present, they apparently are pressing Premier Ky to remove General Co, although the extent of their determination on this issue is unknown.

17. The "Baby Turks'" degree of organization and their ability to act as a unified force are unclear, and they have consistently denied loyalty to any one leader. Instead, they profess strong ideals regarding the integrity and honesty of the armed forces which would allow the military to act as the true rallying point for all anti-Communist elements.

18. Thus far, the "Baby Turks" apparently have had no serious differences with Premier Ky's policies. Most of their "spokesmen," such as Colonel Loan, Saigon mayor Lt. Colonel Cua, and General Khang, are

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closely identified with Ky, and at least one group of "Baby Turks" recently expressed approval of Ky's policies over the past few months.

19. The fact that the "Baby Turks" are in direct control of troops, cutting across the military chain of command at the operating level, however, does inject an element of uncertainty into any assessment of military loyalties. This uncertainty, combined with their professed loyalty to principles rather than to any one leader, could lead to a collision between the "Baby Turks" and Premier Ky in the future. According to one report, Ky has been somewhat concerned by the influence of the "Baby Turks," and, uncertain whether he should promote them or attempt to dilute their influence. It is thus conceivable that Premier Ky may be refraining from moving against Co--despite Co's unsavory reputation and his machinations--because of a desire to maintain some kind of check on the increasing influence of the "Baby Turks."

20. The location of many of the "Baby Turks," in key armored and guard units in the Saigon area, plus their growing interest in military politics and government policies, suggest that they may become an even more important factor in the future.

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Note for D/OCI

Subject: The Memorandum DISSENSION AMONG
SOUTH VIETNAM'S GENERALS

1. This memorandum was prepared in response to the Acting DDI's request for a comprehensive analysis of current frictions within South Vietnam's military leadership.

2. Points made in the memorandum are:

- (a) the main cause of the present friction is the pressure of middle-grade officers on Premier Ky to remove allegedly corrupt generals from their field positions and from the ruling junta;
- (b) the present dissension probably poses no serious threat at this time to Ky's position; but
- (c) the basis is being laid for possible power struggles among the military in the future.

3. We recommend this memorandum be given routine internal and external dissemination.

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